

Capernaum.

By Teresa Craig

Introduction

The richness of history revealed captures the heart and imagination that this site truly is the center from which teaching and miracles flowed through Jesus' life. Arriving early in the morning, before the crowds, one can move freely about the vast archaeological treasure that is Capernaum: The statue of Peter, with the Sea of Galilee as a backdrop, towers over an intricately designed floor mosaic. To the east of this are the ruins of an ancient dwelling believed to be Peter's House.

There is some indication through recent excavations that this ancient dwelling became the first established "house church" after Jesus' resurrection. Above this dwelling an octagonal church was built in the fourth century, quite possibly built to protect the holy structure underneath. This church is known as Peter's Church.

Flanking Peter's Church to the south are remnants of a once thriving community, while to the north are the remains of a magnificent fourth century synagogue. Yet again, underneath this synagogue is the remains of a first century synagogue—one that quite possibly heard the teachings of Jesus. Not only are there many layers of physical history here, but layers of spiritual influence that impacted the entire region of the Galilee.



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Story

A phrase heard often in this part of the world: "If these ancient stones could speak, what would they say? What would they tell us?" Because the Bible shares its clear descriptions of ancient Israel, we can hear the conversations now as if they were still occurring. Here in Capernaum, He spoke: "I am the Bread of Life," "Yes, I am willing to heal you."

Imagine walking near to Jesus and hearing the cries of the people when they saw The Healer in their midst? Feeling the emotion when seeing Him move toward the multitudes and reaching out to heal the broken, the sick, the demon possessed. Imagine walking into Peter's house and seeing his mother-in-law sick with a high fever and Jesus, filled with compassion, reaching out, lifting her up, healed! Then seeing dry palm fronds in the ceiling as they were being stripped away making a hole where a pallet with a man paralyzed was being lowered. Again, Jesus, seeing their faith, speaks the word and the man is forgiven and his body healed. "But when the crowds saw this, they were awestruck, and glorified God, who had given such authority to men." (Matthew 9:8)

This was Jesus, the Son of God, Savior of the world in their midst, and Capernaum is where Jesus came to start His ministry with Peter and his other disciples – "Land of Zebulun and Land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned." From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near." (Matthew 4:13-17)

Imagine the awe of archaeologists who discovered this town from the fourth century, and then digging deeper to discover treasures from the first century. They painstakingly labored to meticulously reveal the outline of what these stones created. With each delicate move of their shovel or spade, uncovering jars, plates, and items of everyday life. Careful not to damage any treasure.

Defining these stones by their arrangement, substance, and intricate carvings on ancient columns they tell of a culture and people who lived at that wondrous time. They unveil simple dwellings, stone walkways, and religious artifacts.

Today, oleander bushes of various colors surround black basalt stones settled near white limestone rocks similar to those used in Herod's Temple. Could this be Peter's house of old? Or, could the prominent structure nearby be the synagogue that Jesus preached in and healed?



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Clearly there was significance to these dwellings to encourage newer, fourth century structures to be built above them. Pilgrims and tourists linger and pray, seeking today the same encounter with compassionate Jesus. Human beings created in the image of God; broken and wanting to be whole.

Interesting that it was this message that Jesus spoke in the synagogue in Nazareth that caused Him to move forward to begin His ministry in Capernaum. When he taught in Luke 4:18-31, referencing Isaiah 61:1-3, He said: "Today this is fulfilled in your midst." The men of the synagogue were shocked at what He was saying. "How can he say that?" "Who does He think He is—God?" Their religious passion obligated them to seek to destroy anyone who would call themselves God. They did not recognize that this Man was God in their midst. (Isaiah 7:14)

From this rejection, Jesus then traveled to Capernaum. I wonder if when He was growing up if He walked past this town? What were the thoughts in His mind? He knew that this city would play a crucial role in the releasing of the manifestation of His Kingdom.

Capernaum – a Jewish city along the Sea of Galilee facilitating the travelers along the seashore, a place of commerce, of family, and of community. The stones are still speaking and miracles are still occurring.

Peter's House

Introduction

One structure built upon another to preserve something precious – A modern-day church built in 1990 on top of a fifth-century octagonal church encompassing and situated above a very simple first-century dwelling. Why? With progressive digging and abundant curiosity, the story begins to unfold. One layer of history reveals walls painted with designs, plastered floors, oil lamps, and other implements that depict a meeting place. Writings on the walls that appear to be prayers: "Jesus have mercy on us." Or crosses etched into the columns. A dining room turned to a meeting room. Why? Digging deeper, these modifications were honoring and safeguarding a simple home. The puzzle pieces were coming together: this site, it is



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determined, was Peter's home, the friend and disciple of Jesus, and possibly the first house church after Jesus' Resurrection.

Story

Who was Peter? A first-century Galilean fisherman and follower of Jesus. A family man with a strong and independent nature; so much so that Jesus had to rebuke him several times because of his expression of self-righteousness, yet this strength was used for God's glory as Peter was greatly loved and called out by Jesus as one who would help to build His church because He knew His resurrection power would also transform Peter's independence to dependence on Him.

Through the gospels, we see that Jesus established His ministry of compassion in Capernaum after leaving Nazareth. Even the name "Capernaum" comes from the name Kfar Nahum, the word Nahum means Comfort. When Jesus began calling his first disciples (Peter, and his brother, Andrew) who lived in Capernaum, it makes sense that within the culture of that time Jesus would have been invited to be part of the home and family of Peter and Andrew since he was not from Capernaum.

From this home and place of security and safety, extensive miracles occurred—Jesus healed the paralytic that was lowered into the home, Peter's mother-in-law was healed from a high fever (Matthew 8:14-17); stories were told about the kingdom of heaven, prayers were prayed, repentance occurred, bread was broken. After Jesus' death and resurrection, the heart of love and spirit of healing remained in the house. As it is today, we long to touch and hold onto what we have loved.

Jewish life and traditions are filled with important rituals to honor and remember those who have gone before. The Talmud indicates that when a Rabbi is buried, a Yeshivah is built upon the tomb of that Rabbi. As an example, the Talmud tells how Rabbi Yehuda Hanassi had requested a Yeshivah be built over his tomb, as a remembrance of him and his life. Jesus, as well, during the Last Supper, while taking the bread and the wine said for His disciples to, "Do this in remembrance of Me" (Luke 22:19). Remembrance in Jewish tradition also means to study and spread the message of the teacher and is generally connected to specific locations associated with that teacher. Therefore, this also gives us the certainty that Peter's House was a gathering place for the first disciples and the first house church.



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Like layers of archaeology and stones, there are layers in our lives of relationships, miracles, business, religion. Even the building blocks of who we are personally are enhanced with every experience of life—new boundaries are added when old ones are removed. The hard interior of our hearts is softened when we encounter True Love.

Today, though fascinating, the stones are all that physically remain in Capernaum. Jesus said, “And you Capernaum will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works are done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until today. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.” (Matthew 11:23-24).

Yet, the spiritual message that powerfully remains is what is spoken directly after the former pronouncement: “Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly of heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”

This is the message that we take away with us today – To continue to come to Him, for the greatest miracle is that in Him we have rest, peace, and eternal life.

Synagogue

Introduction

Beautifully ornate columns with intricately carved symbols of rosettes, grapes, pomegranates, lions, and birds in white limestone rock. It was the seven-branched menorah that was uncovered on one of the columns that led the archaeologists to believe that this amazing structure was truly a synagogue. The limestones, dated fourth century make it clear this was not the original synagogue that Jesus would have preached in. With continued excavation, a black basalt stone foundation was discovered under the current synagogue. This was consistent with the surrounding buildings from this site dated first century. There was no other recorded synagogue in Capernaum at Jesus’ time, so this lower level could truly be where Jesus preached, cast out demons, and healed those who came to Him.



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Story

Walking onto the site of Capernaum along with crowds of tourists, you will be captured by the intensity of this magnificent structure that was revealed as the fourth-century synagogue built snugly on top of a first-century one. Within Jewish tradition, it is common for a newer synagogue to be built on top of an older one. The limestone rocks of the later synagogue were fixed exactly on top of the basalt stone rocks from the first century. One side of the foundation stones is higher than others due to the settling of the original stones. This was a fantastic discovery!

An Orthodox priest, complete in black robes, presides over the visitors in the middle of the synagogue, possibly where the rabbis would have stood when teaching. Maybe underneath the very floor he is standing on, Jesus stood on ancient stones and preached the message of the Kingdom of God. Or reached out His hand to heal and deliver. It is not far-fetched to believe that this was the place where Jesus stood or sat casually talking with His disciples at one of those times when the crowds hadn't caught up with Him yet. Maybe it was quiet and the only sound was that of the gentle waves against the shore of the Galilee.

It is established that this was ancient Capernaum. The town was not large and there was only one synagogue. Scripture tells us that a gentile Centurion, due to his affection for the Jewish people, paid for the original synagogue to be built. This was the same Centurion whose servant was sick and dying and Jesus was asked to heal him, which He did without hesitation.

Walking here you will come to understand that during the time when the Second Temple still stood, Jewish people used the synagogue for the purposes of teaching and handling community affairs, while prayers and worship were performed in the Temple in Jerusalem. After the destruction of the Temple, the synagogues expanded to include prayers and worship – their prayers were presented facing Jerusalem.

Some historians believe that the original formation of the synagogue occurred while the Jewish people were in exile in Babylon around 586 B.C. It is believed that each Jewish family worshipped on their own and in their own way, and thus Jewish leaders considered that if this continued there could be a disintegration of who they were as Jews. Therefore, the Jewish community began to meet in homes to preserve their traditions, culture, and religion. Thereby



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strengthening and maintaining their Jewish identity. It was a critical practice that preserved the Jewish distinctiveness after the diaspora.

The synagogue today remains one of the most central gathering places for the Jewish people. The celebration of life continues in this place in preparation for the eventual return of the Messiah.

